A Chronicle of Confusion

DOUGLASS CATER

WASHINGTON

IF IT HAD BEEN CLOUDY over the Soviet Union on May 1, Francis Gary Powers's flight would have been canceled. A moratorium on flights across the Soviet Union had been ordered to go into effect the very next day, I have been told reliably, and it was to last until after President Eisenhower's post-summit visit there in June.

But once pilot Powers had come down alive twelve hundred miles inside the Soviet border, American misfortunes were entirely man-made. The two weeks before the summit conference consisted of a crisis in phases. In trying to get away from one blunder, the U.S. government stumbled hard into the next.

The first phase was an exercise in the use of intelligence to find out what the Soviets were up to and counterintelligence to mislead them, if possible, about what we were up to. There is reason to believe that U.S. agents knew fairly quickly of the plane's loss as well as the depth of its penetration into Soviet territory. Yet, on May 2, a prepackaged "cover" story was put out, having little relevancy to the origin or destination of Powers's flight. From Turkey an announcement was issued that a weather plane was believed missing. Rescue planes were sent to search the rugged mountain area near Lake Van in northeastern Turkey, even though Powers had taken off from Pakistan. When an item about this appeared in the newspapers, it is now surmised, Khrushchev saw his opportunity to set a trap.

On May 5, Khrushchev baited the trap with great skill, angrily announcing to the Supreme Soviet that a U.S. plane had been "shot down" by a Soviet rocket, but mentioning neither the locale nor the fate of plane and pilot. Articles in the Soviet press indicated that the incident occurred in Soviet Armenia, just across the border from Turkey. Our intelligence experts, reportedly confident that if a rocket had hit the plane it would have left little evidence, were complacent about the Soviet gambit.

As a result, the intelligence-counterintelligence exercise rolled on in Washington without plan or co-ordination. Shortly after Khrushchev spoke, White House Press Secretary James Hagerty told reporters that the President had ordered an investi-

gation and that statements would be issued shortly by NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) and the State Department. Both hastened to put out news releases that afternoon that were elaborations of the original story supplied by the Air Weather Service in Turkey. No one thought to caution NASA information officer Walter T. Bonney or State Department press officer Lincoln White that it was actually a "cover" that should be treated circumspectly. Both carried out their assigned roles with unsuspecting fervor. Bonney ridiculed the notion that the slow-flying U-2 could be used for anything but meteorological purposes. White, next day, went one step further by stating emphatically, "There was absolutely no—N-O, no—deliberate attempt to violate the Soviet air space, and there has never been."

The failure to co-ordinate had a fateful consequence. When asked by newsmen to identify the missing pilot, White begged off with the excuse that the pilot's mother was suffering a serious heart condition and could not stand the shock. But NASA released Powers's name anyway, thus providing Khrushchev with just what he needed to spring his trap. He had Powers, "alive and kicking," and he had caught him near Sverdlovsk, far away from the Turkish border. There was no possibility for NASA to save face any longer by disowning Powers or by pretending that it had been searching for a different plane. Our civilian space agency had been gravely compromised by association with the espionage business. The intelligence-counterintelligence phase ended in total Soviet victory.

There was an interesting footnote to this phase. On the same day that Khrushchev first announced the downing of an American plane, reporters in Washington were given a background briefing at the State Department. There was no mention of the U-2's real mission. Instead, they were cautioned that while Khrushchev voiced traditional Russian sensitivity to border intrusions, there was no reason to believe the incident would disrupt the summit conference.

Who's in Charge?

A second phase began on Saturday, May 7, with a day-long, panic-ridden session at the State Department following Khrushchev's gleeful and detailed announcement of Powers' capture. Much about that day remains a mystery. It is known that Allen

Dulles, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was quite prepared to play the intelligence agent's traditional role of accepting all the blame. But Secretary of State Herter, after telephone consultations with Eisenhower at Gettysburg, decided otherwise. Several factors seemed to have influenced the decision to make a partial public confession: First, there was humiliation over being caught in a lie. Second, some of those involved in the discussions shared a desire to reveal this penetration of the boasted Soviet air defenses during the past four years and viewed it as a chance to embarrass Khrushchev. And third, some felt that it offered an opportunity to propagandize about "open" societies versus "closed" societies.

In making the decision to publicize this highly secret espionage activity, Herter neglected to consult his two top information men, the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, Andrew Berding, and the Deputy Assistant Secretary, Edwin Kretzmann. Both saw the State Department release only after it had been issued to the press shortly after six o'clock that evening. Over at NASA, poor Bonney had just finished putting out a list of Khrushchev's "contradictions."

Actually, Herter's release, bearing Eisenhower's sanction, was a compromise with candor. While conceding that a U-2 flight "probably" had been undertaken for information-gathering purposes, there was the hedge that ". . . insofar as the authorities in Washington are concerned, there was no authorization for any such flight as described by Mr. Khrushchev."

In diplomatic parlance, the phase "as described by Mr. Khrushchev" served as the necessary hedge to make it literally accurate. But to anyone versed in the interpellative powers of Congress and the Washington press corps, there could be little expectation that this nicety of language would be long respected. By Monday, May 9, there was need to answer the irrepressible question: Who was in charge?

ACCORDING TO ONE INSIDER, the dilemma presented to the administration had cruel horns: whether to preserve for the President the personal noninvolvement proffered by Khrushchev or whether to proclaim that he really was master in his own house. There is reason to believe that election-year sensitivity at least partly dictated the decision. Herter's second statement revealed that there had been Presidential authorization for the flights though not for "specific missions."

For some reason Herter was not content to leave it at that. He declared that the United States government would be derelict not to take such measures and that "In fact, the United States has not and *does not* shirk this responsibility." (*Italics added.*) Two days later, Eisenhower added to the impression that the flights were being continued by speaking of them—in the present tense—as a "distasteful but vital necessity."

During the week before the summit, it seemed to be a deliberate policy to leave this point unclear. State Department information officers could offer reporters no guidance. Press Secretary Hagerty categorically knocked down a story by

James Reston of the New York *Times* that the President had, in fact, ordered a suspension of the flights. (Hagerty was to be the source of more than one piece of misinformation during this period.) As the date of the summit conference approached, only George V. Allen, director of the United States Information Agency, took the trouble to point out on the TV program "College News Conference" that Herter's words left some ambiguity.

This evasiveness was a stratagem with apparently no strategy behind it. According to one highly placed intelligence officer, the flights had been doomed from the moment Powers was caught, if for no other reason than the sensitivity of our allies about further use of the bases. But for some reason—or lack of reason—no one would admit this inevitability until after Khrushchev had delivered his bitter personal attack on Eisenhower. At that point, Eisenhower's concession seemed more a retreat before bullying than a decisive act of policy.

Nixon's Counterattack

The third and, it was hoped, final phase of the U-2 crisis was anticipated with some eagerness around Washington. This was to be the phase of the counteroffensive, marked by the unmasking of Khrushchevian hypocrisy on matters of spying and by other wondrous revelations only vaguely hinted at. Among other things, some Republicans in Congress predicted that there might be a public exhibition of all that we had learned while plane-spying on the Soviets. It would, they intimated, be an eye-opener, what with cameras that could photograph golf balls from sixty thousand feet.

Strangely, the counteroffensive seemed to have difficulty getting under way. Various officials referred to the "well-known" facts of Soviet espionage. Senator Karl E. Mundt (R., South Dakota) had the Library of Congress prepare a list of Communist spy cases which he dutifully inserted in the *Congressional Record.* But there was little evidence of much forethought about this tactic until May 18, when, with the summit conference already a shambles, Vice-President Nixon launched his own counteroffensive. It seemed to be aimed more at the Democrats than the Soviets.

Earlier, during a marathon TV appearance on "Open End" with producer David Susskind, Nixon had not seemed too well briefed on administration strategy. He had resolutely defended the timing of the U-2 flight (". . . there is never a right

time to make one . . . if you're going to get caught") and the threat to continue such flights ("Let's suppose . . . the United States will now announce to Mr. Khrushchev: 'Well, since this plane had been knocked down, we're going to discontinue activities of this sort.' Look at the position this puts the United States in and our allies.") The next day Mr. Eisenhower let it be known that he had already ended the flights.

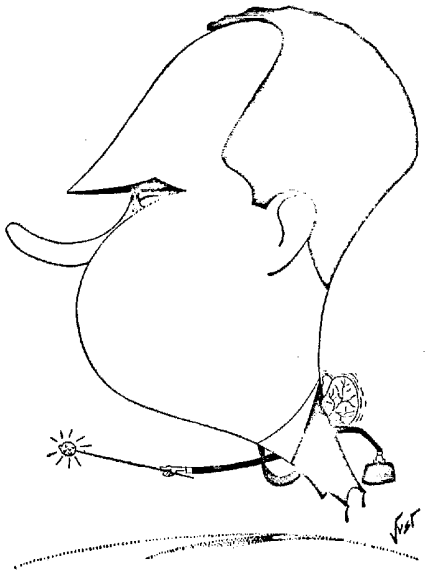
But even before the President could get back from Paris, the Vice-President, during a political swing through upstate New York, began what one newspaper report described as "a calculated move that had the backing of . . . top administration officials." At an early-morning press conference, Nixon told reporters that even as Khrushchev was touring America last fall, two Russians had been "apprehended" trying to obtain classified information in Springfield, Illinois. Out of consideration for the Soviet premier, which Nixon personally shared, the incident had been kept secret.

Reporters spent a baffling day running down details of Nixon's spy story. The facts turned out to be slightly different. The Russians, both employees of the United Nations, had been in Springfield, Massachusetts, not Illinois. They had not been apprehended. One was later sent home after a complaint registered at the U.N., while the other was presumably still under surveillance at the time Nixon made his disclosure. The FBI kept mum, but at the State Department Lincoln White dutifully gave out the name of the discharged U.N. employee.

'Least Worst' Decisions

As a counterblow against the Soviets, the Vice-President's initiative on the political circuit had all the force of a popgun. But in dealing with the Democrats Nixon showed that he had lost none of his touch for infighting. When questioned about a reported move by some Democrats in Congress to held an investigation of the U-2 fiasco, he replied briskly: "If they believe we should have allowed a gap in our intelligence, let them investigate it. If they believe the President should have apologized to Mr. Khrushchev, let them investigate."

Certain questions badly need to be asked by Congress, even if not on Nixon's terms. Who was responsible for setting such a late date for the



moratorium on the flights? Who supervised the slipshod intelligence-counterintelligence gambits? Who tried to co-ordinate the public presentation of the case as it moved along haphazardly from agency press conference to departmental briefing, from Hagerty's close-mouthed treatment to Nixon's performance on "Open End"? Who tried to anticipate the consequences, domestic and foreign, of making the first half-hearted confession and then the emphatic one that embarrassed our allies and left neither Eisenhower nor Khrushchev room for maneuver? Finally, whose "calculated move" was it to have the Vice-President transfer the struggle to the partisan arena?

Perhaps the most disturbing thing about the search for a culprit is the notable absence of any single individual or group upon whom the actual responsibility could be fixed. Both the timing of the government's responses and their internal contradictions furnish evidence that no one at the White House was intimately concerned with keeping on top of things.

On the contrary, there is reason to assign blame to the very machinery that has been set up to help the President in dealing with emergencies. On the morning of May 5, when Khrushchev first announced that the plane was down, Eisenhower was on his way to a secret mountain retreat in Maryland to meet with the National Security Council under simulated war conditions. Evidently no one thought to re-examine the quite transparent alibi that had been filed away for use on such an occasion. The myth that the NSC would co-ordinate a crisis with push-button efficiency was sadly exposed when officials in Washington began communicating with each other via the news tickers.

Admittedly, as one harassed official remarked, it was a matter of making "least worst" decisions once it became known that Powers had been captured. But it should have been possible to avoid the bloopers that only compounded a difficult situation. It would have helped, for example, if Hagerty had not given a muddled interpretation to the fairly innocuous press release on nuclear-test resumption that he issued routinely from Gettysburg the same day Khrushchev sprang his surprise about Powers. But then, it would help if Hagerty regarded his job as something more than personal press agent for the President.

DESPITE the widely touted "co-ordination and review" councils, there seems to be no one among the White House staff who has authority or inclination to act decisively in a crisis. In the earlier years of the administration, Presidential assistants like William Jackson, Nelson Rockefeller, and C. D. Jackson might have tried to take hold of things during such an emergency. Today, their counterparts are self-effacing men whose impact on the course of government is scarcely discernible.

Of course, no amount of energetic action on the part of subordinates can substitute for Presidential decisiveness in a time of crisis. This is a Constitutional fact of life which defies all efforts to set up "emergency" machinery for government. In the present case, it became apparent that Eisenhower was unprepared to deal with the U-2 crisis until, in the form of a raging, vituperative Khrushchev across the Paris conference table, it hit him squarely in the face.